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ABSTRACT

The problems of Indian children as students in the educational system, and particularly the problems associated with learning to read, are discussed in this paper. The Indian child is not basically a competitive individual; hence, he cannot understand the traditional classroom's emphasis upon individual achievement. In general, the Indian student is involved in being, not in becoming. Therefore, education as preparation for the future is not a realistic motive for him. Research shows that many Indian children rely heavily on nonverbal means of expression. They must first be taught to speak and read their own language before English language instruction can be successful. The following guidelines are offered as recommendations for those involved with teaching reading to American Indian youth: (1) Identify the basic premises of Indian culture, or any culture, which require an adjustment in the learning setting. (2) Review and apply the teaching strategies which are applicable to the special instructional problems represented by Indian youth. (3) Recognize individual differences among Indian students as well as collective differences between students and majority groups. (4) Facilitate the ultimate goals of self-reliance and self-direction. (Author/TO)

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TEACHING READING TO THE AMERICAN INDIAN

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Is America listening to what the American Indian of today has to say about himself? Is America reading what the Indian, not the white man, has written about his history and his future? If society expects the Indian youth to read, learn, and grow in abilities and intelligence, why are so many literate Americans, including some educators and government administrators, so abysmally ignorant about the problems of Indian-Americans and, more specifically, about the problems of Indian children as students in today's educational system?

The Indian child views education as a series of almost insurmountable obstacles which his experiences in life have not equipped him to overcome. He sees that society's policies tend to overlook the right of the Indian to be himself, a unique human being, and he realizes that attempts have been made in the past to either exclude

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the Indian-American from sharing the benefits of the country alongside his non-Indian fellow citizens, or to force upon the Indian the hateful knowledge that he cannot gain acceptance as a first-class citizen of this country without becoming a replica of his "white brother." The Indian, torn between his heritage and a desire to achieve on the same level as members of other races, has an extremely low self-concept and often turns away from education and all it represents to him in terms of conflict.

A teacher of Indian students must understand the problems leading to this low self-concept and must make himself aware of the causes for these problems, which are directly related to the cultural and societal differences between American Indians and the members of other races who make up the American citizenry. These differences are not merely physical in nature because of habits of dress, speech, and measurable abilities, but also involve covert differences in attitudes, ideals, and beliefs.

America's Indian youth is, from his childhood, more tribe-and family-oriented than is a white student, for example, whose goals are quite self-directed. Studies have also indicated that an Indian is not basically a competitive individual, and this fact would tend to defeat the purpose of classroom settings structured for the competition-minded student. The Indian youth, or adult, wonders why he should attempt to outdo someone if it will cause embarrassment to the other student, who may be brother, cousin, or friend, but regardless of the relationship between them, each feels that the other should be able to maintain the innate human dignity that each Indian accords to every other human being.

Instructing the Indian-American student to prepare for the future is also in direct contradiction to his ideals and attitudes. Indians are interested in being, not in becoming; their attention is firmly fixed upon the now. The speed at which society travels and the rate of progress made is of little importance. Frantic pace and expended energies directed toward the amassing of material wealth baffles a race who believe in working only as it is relative to the necessities of life and who live by the creed that excellence of achievement in whatever one does is the most important goal.

There are many other facets of Indian ideology that may directly or indirectly affect his educational processes, but there is one factor that relates more closely to achievement in education than any other, and that is language, written or oral. Instruction in language is essential to instruction in reading, and research shows that numbers of Indian children rely to a considerable extent on non-verbal means of expression in community and family relationships during the formative years. The adjustment to the use of any language, including his own, may be difficult for a child to make under certain sets of circumstances.

What type of classroom setting is best-structured to meet the unusual needs of Indian youth? Bureau of Indian Affairs research shows that education in public schools increases the achievement of Indian children, and it has long been known that any children possess intelligence that is equivalent to that of children from other races and cultures, but the vast differences between students occupying the same integrated classroom is a problem that still confronts and often defeats the most concerned educators.

The answers to all of the problematic questions must lie in the skills, attitudes, and understanding of those people who have accepted and will in future accept the challenge of teaching the classroom units of very different individuals.

The teacher must, of necessity, become the single most important feature of the classroom, but in order to become important to the student, he must understand not only himself, but each of those he is committed to teach. Any child who is accepted by an understanding adult as an individual will be guided toward self-acceptance and an increasingly positive self-concept. Children in an Indian society are generally treated as the equals of the adults and cooperation among the members of different generations is important to them. They do not have to tolerate indifference at home and in the community, and there is no reason why they should have to accept it in the classroom.

Understanding a student who is a member of another race can present quite a challenge to a non-Indian teacher, and because of these differences in ideology, many educators and administrators advocate the use of trained Indian teachers, who are already conversant with the language and cultural backgrounds of their students. In a reservation or bureau school, this theory might have merit, but if it is to be accepted that integrated classrooms foster increased student achievement, then the difficulties that might arise between Indian teachers and non-Indian students in the class could prove to be as problematic as they would be were the roles reversed. In an attempt to solve the problem, it must be accepted by anyone involved in education that any teacher, regardless of race, must commit himself to sharing knowledge and understanding with all of his students, avoiding scrupulously the age-old conflicts between traditions, cultures, religions, and social aspects of a students experience.

This knowledge of environment and experience can be made to work for the teacher. By learning as much as possible about his pupils, he also offers himself the opportunity to structure the learning situation to fit the individual needs of each of them. It becomes necessary, therefore, to avoid the more traditional methods of instruction and their materials unless they can be adapted to serve the goals of the individualization process.

A reading program for either an integrated classroom or a unit composed entirely of Indian students could certainly be structured with the same basic premises of individualized instruction. Then the vital question becomes one of language. A bi-lingual approach to reading provides the best incentive to date for the increase in reading achievement among members of a minority group for whom English is a second language, and there is increased special teaching of reading as the second language for Indian students already proficient in their own tongue. With Indian children, an additional obstacle arises where there has been an incidence of non-verbal communication and expression which has existed for an extended period of time. These children must be taught to speak their own tongue and read what is written in their own language before a bi-lingual set of materials will be of value to them. In this type of situation, a non-Indian teacher can receive valuable support from sources outside the classroom, provided the appeal for assistance is motivated by real need and a genuine desire to involve families and communities in the education of their members. Parents and citizens who know the culture and the community will be valuable as observers, consultants, and evaluators, watching to see if the programs established hold promise of helping the children. Compensatory, remedial adult education can

be established to train teachers' aides within the community and to educate older members of the families and tribes in areas where their opportunities have previously been limited. Especially in reading and language arts can the ethnic relationship be of prime importance, and school values can be linked with the traditional values of family and tribe. These contacts could also enable the teacher to learn more about his students through parent-teacher conferences, visits to the homes, and an increased overall awareness of attitudes and ideas.

After traditional methods and materials have been "shelved" and outside sources have been utilized to the fullest, teachers must be prepared to use all their skills to work toward innovative, meaningful experiences for the students. They must be receptive to the needs of each student, and should be capable, where necessary, of establishing new procedures as yet untried and developing projects to challenge the imagination, interest, and desire for knowledge within the student.

American-Indian students will require closely-supervised training and practice in the reading skills when they have unsufficiently mastered their second language. Teaching of word attack skills can be profitably used to help correct mispronunciations and problems with sounds. Vocabulary training is vital to correct misconceptions about the meanings of words and must be handled carefully to avoid confusing the student, whose concepts probably stem from his experiences with the language on a limited basis.

It is acknowledged by experts that the teaching of comprehension to students who are basically unfamiliar with a language is the most complicated and challenging aspect of the reading teacher's instruction. It must be approached initially by limiting reading and discussion to those materials dealing with simple concepts which can be easily

assimilated by the students at the outset. Materials can then increase in difficulty and conceptualization to meet the learning pace of the individual student. As the knowledge, experience, and achievement increase, materials can be scaled to ability, but interest and attention can only be coaxed from students, not coerced.

A major drawback to the teaching of reading to the Indian child or young adult in the past has been a lack of good material available for use. Most techniques for reading were geared to a basal text and there was a lack of interest from the students which resulted in under-achievement in nearly every situation involving students from Indian environments. Education in Indian culture and history was almost non-existent as late as 1969, and attempts were made to divert the Indian-American from the study of his national heritage and to destroy his pride in the traditions of his people.

Today, recognition of the worth of Indian cultures and history have made available volumes of invaluable reading matter for the teacher and student. School libraries and classrooms must contain books in which American Indians figure realistically and prominently in a positive way so that Indian students can identify with them and retain their sense of pride in their heritage which is so important for their self-concept. It is time the educational community ceased to allow the use of ideas and information from materials which are consistently detrimental to the attitudes of the Indian population, particularly those who are just beginning to experience an interest in knowledge and a new awareness of themselves. Thousands of useful books are now being published which allow prideful identification by members of all minority groups and they must be made available to educators who are interested in the development of self importance in their students.

The teaching of reading and other skills must not be promoted with an idea toward removing an Indian child from his native environment without due consideration for his feelings or ideas for the future, nor do educators want to fall into a pattern of educating students to remain in the same environment. Many Indian-Americans would be capable of serving their communities as teachers after opportunities for training as teachers have been made available to them, but they must not feel themselves compelled to adopt a function which serves no value for them as individuals.

In cases where students plan to use their talents and experiences in fields other than education, whether they remain on the reservation or not, the values of instruction are the same when viewed from the standpoint of beneift to the individual.

If the learning experience is meaningful and lasting, reading, listening, and understanding can achieve a "breakthrough" for many students. The teacher, and not the system, must assume primary responsibility for making these things happen through understanding, involvement with, and appreciation of the Indian tradition, culture, and life style as represented by his students. The ideal teacher is the one who becomes receptive to his students' needs and abilities and subscribes to a theory directed at promoting the self-concept of the pupil and encouraging his self-directed adventure into learning.

In conclusion the following guidelines are offered as recommendations for consideration to those involved with teaching reading to American Indian youth as identified throughout this paper.

1. Identify the basic premises of Indian culture or any culture which require an adjustment in the learning setting.

2. Review and apply the teaching strategies which are applicable to the special instructional problems represented by Indian youth.

3. Recognize individual differences among the Indian students as well as the collective differences, if they exist, between students and the majority groups.

4. Facillitate the ultimate goals of self-reliance and self-direction.

5. Become active in an in-service education program--your own.

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